The First Devraj Chanana Memorial Lecture 1969

SOCIAL CHANGES IN EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA

(circa A. D. 500-1200)

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I consider it a great privilege and honour to have been called upon to deliver the first lecture in the Devraj Chanana Memorial Series. Learning Sanskrit in the traditional manner at Hardwar, Chanana completed his formal education in Paris. He imbibed the best elements of traditional and modern cultures and contributed to their deeper understanding through lectures and publications. Participation in nationalist and progressive movements gave realistic dimensions to his studies. Chanana's varied interests covered Sanskrit, Hindi, Panjabi, Bengali, social and economic history, social anthropology, etc. A gifted linguist, he wrote with felicity in several languages. He produced his book *Slavery in Ancient India* in French and translated it into English; the book was also rendered into Russian.

Devraj Chanana was a devoted teacher and educationist. His family carried on fairly prosperous business, but he resisted pressures for joining his ancestral profession and chose to be a teacher. Although he was not given his due place in the academic hierarchy he gave his best to his students and colleagues. Chanana rendered valuable services to the University of Delhi in planning its development. It is fitting that Dr C. D. Deshmukh, with whom he was closely associated in this work and under whom he served as teacher, should preside over the first memorial lecture.

It is not possible to touch upon the wide range of scholarly contributions made by Devraj Chanana. But I wish to draw your attention to his penetrating analysis of the ancient slave system. It is a thorough and careful examination of the various Pāli and Sanskrit terms used for slaves, and their skillful piecing together has resulted in a revealing work on the social structure of ancient India. It is a pity that Chanana did not live long to carry forward his researches into post-Gupta times. A discussion of some social changes in this period should be the best tribute to his memory.

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CLOSED ECONOMY : LOSS OF MOBILITY

The background to social changes in early medieval India is provided by certain economic developments. The most significant change in the economy of the period is the large-scale transfers of land revenues and land to both secular and religious elements by princes and their vassals. The process is attested by a large number of charters generally recorded on copper-plates which mostly grant villages with fiscal and administrative immunities to priests in the initial stage but also to vassals and officials in the later stage. In the 11th and 12th centuries vassals and officials were granted villages and land revenues, especially in the Rajput kingdoms of northern India.[1] In the Deccan and South India they were assigned villages for military service. Although the country was split into numerous principalities, especially after the fall of the Pālas, Pratīhāras and Rāṣṭrakūṭas, the process of land grants made royal authority ineffective even in these small kingdoms. The economic and political tie between the central government on the one hand and local beneficiaries on the other was disrupted by the grant of fiscal and administrative autonomy to the beneficiaries, which gave rise to so many fiscal and administrative islands existing by themselves. Subinfeudation further reduced the size of these economic units and created conditions for the development of a kind of social hierarchy based on unequal distribution of land or land revenues, as the case may be.

The identity of the benefice of a village, or of groups of villages which were not included in it, was strengthened by the decline of trade in this period. The heyday of Indian foreign trade lasted for about 100 years or so in the first and second centuries when India exported spices, silk, and precious metals to the eastern part of the Roman empire. The export of Indian silk to the Byzantium continued till the middle of the 6th century A. D. But once the Byzantines had learnt from the Chinese the art of growing silk worms they no longer required silk from China or India.[2] The coastal areas of India perhaps carried on some trade with South-East Asia and with China, though this had little impact on the internal economy of the country. But the overall decline of trade weakened the economic links between the coastal towns and the towns situated in the interior and again between towns and villages.

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1. R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism* : *c.* 300-1200 (Calcutta, 1965), Ch. V.
2. Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia* (London, 1961), pp. 46-7.

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Commercial decline in this period is clearly indicated by the paucity of coins. Although the Pālas, the Gurjara-Pratīhāras and the Rāṣṭrakūṭas ruled continuously for about three centuries and more, over the whole of the country except the deep South, we cannot attribute with confidence any series of coins to them. The absence of gold coins in post-Gupta times is in sharp contrast with their abundance under the Kuṣāṇas and Guptas. In the absence of actual coins it is not possible to make much of the references to coins in inscriptions of medieval dynasties. Although gold coins were revived under the Kalacuris, Candellas, Gāhaḍavālas, etc., in the 11th-12th centuries it was on a small scale, and at any rate in the period c. A.D. 650-1000 this coinage was almost conspicuous by its absence. It is obvious that the dearth of coins hampered both internal and external trade and left the villages to meet their needs by themselves either singly or collectively. The existence of too many kingdoms meant payment of customs at numerous checkposts which further undermined trade. The *Kathāsaritsāgara* speaks of traders who moved through forests to escape payment of duties *śulka*.[1]

The decline of trade and commerce practically stopped the movement of artisans and traders from one part of the country to another. Real urban centres which demanded the service of artisans declined, and their place was taken mostly by *skandhāvāras*, military and administrative centres or feudal courts which did not have much use for trade. Artisans had to be tied down to the villages or towns where they lived to serve local clients or masters without any break. Whenever a village was granted the inhabitants of the village, which naturally included artisans, were asked to carry out the orders of the beneficiaries. This could not be possible unless they stayed in the village. Two forged charters of the 7th century A.D., ascribed to Samudra Gupta, ask tax-paying peasants and artisans not to leave the village and not to settle in tax-free villages.[2] Some Candella grants name the various categories of artisans who are transferred to the beneficiaries along with the villages which they inhabit.[3] In the Deccan and South India we have several instances of artisans being made over to temples and monasteries [4] In the coastal area of the western Deccan they were also transferred to the guilds of merchants.[5]

1. VI. 3. 105.
2. *CII*, iii, no. 60, ll. 12-3.
3. *EI*, xx, no. 14, B plates, l. 19.
4. *EI*, iii, no. 40; *Epigraphia Carnatica*, vii, Shikarpur Taluk 20a.
5. *EI*, xxx, no. 30, ll. 8, 28.

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We have no clear case of merchants being transferred to beneficiaries along with the land, but medieval artisans who produced and sold their goods were not much different from merchants. Interdiction of sea voyage would mostly affect merchants, and though this rule may not have been observed it reflects the stagnant economy of the period. A few charters of the 6th-8th centuries from the western Deccan do not permit the merchants to congregate in the same market in the city[1], which eliminates the element of competition and points towards the localisation of traders.

That the peasants were expected to stay in the village made over in gift can be inferred from the wording of the land charters which commonly enjoin the villagers to pay all dues to the beneficiaries and carry out their orders. From the 6th century A.D. onwards, in backward and mountainous areas such as Orissa, Deccan, etc., sharecroppers and peasants attached to the land are specifically instructed to stick to the soil.[2] Once this practice was considered useful by the landowners it was also introduced into settled and agriculturally advanced areas. In northern India many land charters clearly transfer the peasants along with the soil to the beneficiaries, and the terms used for the purpose are *dhana jana-sahita*[3], *janatā-samṛddha*[4], or *sa-prativāsi-jana-sameta*.[5] This was done obviously to eliminate all ambiguities in the relation of the peasants with the donees; but its chief result was to preserve the existing character of village economy.

Since peasants, artisans and merchants were attached to their respective habitations, this fostered a closed economy and generated a sense of strong localism. Their masters—princes, priests and various kinds of beneficiaries—might change, but there would be no change in the position of labourers, artisans, cultivators, etc., who were attached to the soil whoever happened to be its master. Peasants and artisans found it difficult to go independently from one place to another. They stayed on at the same place unless they were compelled by intolerable oppression or removed for the benefit of the grantees under the terms of the grant, as in central and western India.[6] The only mobility worth the name in medieval period is that of soldiers for fighting, of priests for acquiring new lands, and of pilgrims for visiting religious shrines.

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1. Ibid., l. 6.
2. *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 54-6.
3. *EI*, xxxv, no. 17. I owe this reference to Dr B. N. S. Yadav.
4. *EI*, xxx, no. 17.
5. *CII*, iii, no. 80, l. 10.
6. *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 118-9.

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Although it was a period of wars troop movements did not promote commerce. Part of the provisions meant for feeding the army was carried by the soldiers themselves, and the remainder was forcibly collected by them from the villages lying on their route, which were also compelled to supply forced labour for transport and other allied purposes. This system therefore did not generate any mobility of merchants, as was the case with the Muslim army whose provisions were supplied by the roving merchants (*banjārās*). Probably priestly donees induced some artisans and peasants to migrate to new settlements, as has been the practice in recent times, but the immigrants remained attached to their masters, and the new settlements assumed the pattern of closed economy prevalent in the original settlements. The migration of priests from one part of the country to another cannot be compared with the migration of discontented nobles and enterprising traders in ancient Greece. In India priests were invited by the princes to inhospitable tracts to strengthen their power against hostile populations, and generally brāhmaṇas were granted land within not more than 100 miles of their original homes.

The picture of immobile brāhmaṇas in the medieval Dharmaśāstras is in keeping with the growth of closed economic units in post-Gupta times. The *kalivarjyas* (things prohibited in the Kali age) limit the movements of the brāhmaṇas, and what is prescribed for members of the highest social order has to be emulated by others if they want to rise in status. Although brāhmaṇas are permitted to undertake journey for performing sacrifices, they are not allowed long journeys on the ground that this would interfere with keeping their Vedic and domestic fires burning[1] The regulations regarding sea voyage are rather severe. The *Auśanasa Smṛti* states that those who undertake sea voyage are fallen from caste and not fit to be invited to funeral feasts (*śrāddha*).[2] Even after a brāhmaṇa performs the penance prescribed for going on sea voyage, intercourse with him is not considered desirable. Albiruni informs us that the area within which a brāhmaṇa could live is fixed, and that a Hindu is not generally permitted to enter the land of the Turks or of the Karṇāṭas.[3] The law-book of Bṛhatparāśara recommends that no man would give his daughter to one who lives at a great distance,[4] and this is intended to cover per-

1. Batuknath Bhattacharya, *The 'Kalivaijyas'* (Calcutta, 1943), p. 67; P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, iii, 953, 955.
2. Kane, op. cit., iii, 934.
3. *Alberuni's India*, ed. Edward C. Sachau (Delhi, 1964), ii, 134-5.
4. Quoted in B. N. Sharma, *Social Life in Northern India* [A. D. 600-1000] (Delhi, 1966), p. 12.

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sons of higher varṇas, especially the brāhmaṇas. Pilgrimages to very distant holy places, beyond the sea or on the border of Bhāratavarṣa, are prohibited.[1] All this makes sense in the context of feudal localism, which ruled out economic and other types of connections between one region of the country and the other. It is significant that the earlier texts talk in terms of *deśadharma* or district customs, but several medieval works refer to *grāmadharma*,[2] or *grāmya-dharma* as it is mentioned in the *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi*[3] of Hemacandra (1088-1172), and some texts also mention *grāmācāra*[4] and *sthānācāra*.[5] They reflect the growing importance of villages as self-sufficient economic and administrative units.

FEUDAL RANKS AND THE VARṆAS

Land grants and subinfeudation led to unequal distribution of land and power on a large scale and created new social groups and ranks which did not quite fit in with the existing fourfold varṇa system. The medieval law-books ignore this development, but several texts on architecture try to reconcile the ranking based on birth with that based on the possession of land and power. A beginning is made by Varāhamihira, who prescribes varying sizes for the houses of the different grades of ruling chief and also of members of the four varṇas; in such a context the natural thing for the earlier texts would have been to discuss the cases of only the four *varṇas*. The *Mayamata*, an early medieval text, lays down that the king of the whole earth should have an eleven-storeyed house, the *dvijāti* a nine-storeyed house, the ordinary king (*nṛpa*) a seven-storeyed house, the vaiśyas and military captains a four-storeyed house, the śūdra a house ranging from one to three storeys, and the *sāmantapramukha*, etc., a five-storeyed house.[6] Here along with members of the four varṇas different categories of princes and *sāmantas* are introduced into the housing scheme more clearly than in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*.

However, some texts ignore considerations of varṇa and are solely guided by the relative status of the feudal lords or nobles. The *Aparājitapṛcchā* of Bhaṭṭa Bhuvanadeva (12th century) specifies the size of the residence of nine categories

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1. Kane, op. cit., iii, 953.
2. *Devibhagavata* cited in R. C. Hazra, *Studies in Upapuranas*, ii, 325. I owe this reference to Dr B. N. S. Yadav.
3. III. 201.
4. *Brhannaradiya Purana*, 22.11.
5. *Skanda Purana*, Brahma Khanda, II.40.5.
6. XXIX. 80-2.

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of nobles including *mahāmaṇḍaleśvara*, *māṇḍalika*, *mahāsāmanta*, *sāmanta* and *laghusāmanta*. It also prescribes the size of the houses of some others who are lower in the scale.[1] It speaks of eight categories of feudal vassals when it describes a typical feudal court. It recommends that the emperor, i.e. *samrāṭ*, who holds the title of *mahārājādhirāja parameśvara*, should have in the court 4 *maṇḍaleśvaras*, 12 *māṇḍalikas* 16 *mahāsāmantas*, 32 *sāmantas*, 160 *laghusāmantas* and 400 *caturaśikas*, below whom all the others are known as *rājaputras*.[2] It further lays down that the income of the *laghusāmanta* should amount to 5,000, of the *sāmanta* 10,000, and of the *mahāsāmanta* 20,000.[3] Whether these various ranks of feudal chiefs are thought to be kṣatriyas or also belong to the other varṇas is not clear. But another contemporary text, the *Mānaśāra*, shows that at least a few feudal ranks were open to members of all varṇas. In Chapter 42 it classifies the princes in descending order and status into nine categories, the highest being the *cakravartin* and the two lowest being the *prahāraka* and *astragrāhin;* it also describes nine kinds of throne differing according to the status of the prince or chief.[4] The significant thing in this text is that everybody, irrespective of his varṇa, could get the two lower military ranks in the feudal hierarchy, the rank of *prahāraka* and that of *astragrāhin*. Although lowest in rank, the *astragrāhin* is entitled to have 500 horses, 5,000 elephants, 50,000 soldiers, 5,000 women attendants and one queen.[5] This text therefore clearly transcends considerations of varṇa and thus provides the basis for the emerging social and political organisation based on new distribution of land and power.

Social hierarchy based on four gradations was reflected in the Vajrayāna system of Buddhism, which was popular in north-eastern India during this period. Its pantheon was conceived as a pyramidical structure having at the base twenty-five Bodhisattvas. These were headed by seven *mānuṣī* or mortal Buddhas, who in their turn were presided over by five *dhyāni* or meditating Buddhas. And finally at the apex of the pantheon stood like paramount power the richly dressed and ornamented

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1. 81. 2-12.
2. 71. 33-4, 39; V. S. Agrawala, *Harshacharita-Ek-Sanskritik Adhyayan* (Patna, 1953), p. 178, fn. 3.
3. Quoted by Agrawala, op. cit., p. 203.
4. P. K. Acharya, *Hindu Architecture in India and Abroad, Manasara Series* (Oxford, 1946), vi, 125; this is found in Chapters 45 and 46 of the text.
5. P. K. Acharya, op. cit., vi, 125.

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Vajrasattva.[1] The whole thing obviously represented a divine social ladder providing for four rungs of Buddhist gods.

The social identity of the higher sections of landed gentry was established by means of several outer symbols and insignia of power. In the Deccan, along with the land grants they were sometimes given a badge of honour on the forehead. In the country as a whole vassals were generally invested with fly-whisk, umbrella, horses, elephants, planquins, etc., and the mightiest of them was empowered to use five musical instruments,[2] which was a rare privilege enjoyed by the sovereign only. The *cakravartin*, *mahāsāmanta* and *sāmanta* were permitted to erect the chief gate (*siṃhadvāra*),[3] which could not be done by lesser vassals. All these marks of social status seem to have been conferred without much consideration of varṇa; only those who enjoyed high military and political status on account of their landed possessions were entitled to these symbols of social rankings.

During the medieval period artisans and merchants were given feudal titles indicating military and administrative ranks. The Deopara inscription of Vijayasena informs us that Śūlapāṇi, head of the artisans of Vārendra, held the title *raṇaka*,[4] which must have added to his social status. Certain titles such as those of *ṭhākur*, *rāut*, *nāyaka*, etc., were confined not only to the kṣatriyas or Rajputs but were also conferred on kāyasthas and members of other castes who were granted land and who served in the army. It is this which explains the survival of the title *ṭhākur* in modern times among various categories of brāhmaṇas, among the Rajputs, kāyasthas, and among barbers and similar so-called lower castes.

The constant transfer of land or land revenues made by princes to priests, temples and officials led in early medieval times to the rise and growth of the scribe or the kāyastha community. A large number of writers and record keepers had to be employed to draft documents of assignment of land and to maintain records of the lands and villages, and of the gradually increasing items of revenue which were given in grants. The beginning of fragmentation of land on account of the laws of the partition of landed property

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1. Benoytosh Bhattacharya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography* (Calcutta, 1958), Chapters I & II.
2. *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 22-3, 99.
3. *Aparajitaprccha*, 81. 21-4.
4. *Inscriptions of Bengal*, iii, ed. N. G. Majumdar (Rajshahi, 1929), no. 5, verse 36.

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from Gupta times made the maintenance of the details of individual plots necessary. Boundary disputes form an important section in the law-books, and they could not be easily settled without the help of records. Further, on account of subinfeudation sometimes as many as four and five parties could lay claims to the same plot of land. Somebody would claim it as the sovereign of the land, another person might claim it as the vassal of the sovereign, a third person might claim it as a sub-vassal, and still a fourth person might claim it as the actual cultivator.[1] Therefore village and land records had to be carefully maintained in order to avoid and settle land disputes which arose frequently.

This whole work was done by a class of writers who were known by various names such as *kāyastha, karaṇa, karaṇika, adhikṛta, pustapāla, citragupta, lekhaka, divira, dharmalekhin, akṣaracaṇa akṣaracañcu, akṣapaṭalika, akṣapaṭalādhikṛta,* etc. Just as the brāhmaṇas formed only one class of priests out of sixteen kinds of priests in Vedic times so also in the beginning the kāyasthas formed only one class of about a dozen kinds of writers and record keepers. In course of time all the other record keepers came to be known as kāyasthas. In the initial stage literate members from the higher varṇas were recruited as kāyasthas or scribes to meet the fiscal and administrative needs of the community. Kalhaṇa notes that the brāhmaṇa Śivaratha was appointed as a kāyastha[2] official; we also hear that Lokanātha of brāhmaṇa ancestry on the father's side was a karaṇa,[3] But gradually the scribes, recruited from different varṇas, cut off marriage and other social connections with the parent varṇas and confined all their social intercourse to the new community; they practised class endogamy and family exogamy. Faced with the problem of finding a place for the kāyasthas in the varṇa system the brāhmaṇa lawgivers fell into a dilemma and connected them with both the śūdras as well as the dvijas (twice-born). Since the Dharmaśāstra texts on the origin of the kāyasthas are ambiguous and historical examples not confined to one varṇa, in recent times the Calcutta High Court called them śūdras and the Allahabad High Court called them brāhmaṇas.

The rise of the kāyasthas as a professional literati caste naturally undermined the monopoly of the brāhmaṇas as writers and scribes. Kāyastha ministers served the Candella

1. *Indian Feudalism*, pp. 153-4.
2. Kane, op. cit., ii, 77.
3. *EI*, xv, no. 19.

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and Kalacuri princes in Madhya Pradesh and the kings of Karṇāṭaka and Orissa. This was naturally resented by the brāhmaṇas who mostly manned such high offices. They were also angry with the kāyasthas because they maintained records of land grants with which the former were mainly concerned. As scribes and record keepers the kāyasthas must have caused constant trouble to the brāhmaṇas who formed a considerable class of assignees. The kāyasthas therefore never appear in fovourable light in brahmanical texts. Although they are first mentioned as early as the 4th century A.D. by the lawgiver Yājñavalkya,[1] they are represented as oppressors of subjects. By the 12th century A.D. the tendency to denounce the kāyasthas had reached its culmination. Their condemnation was a favourite theme in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa,[2] and is repeated with modifications in several subsequent texts.

In the countryside in northern India there emerged a class of village elders and headmen called *mahattaras*, who had to be informed of the land grants and transactions. They had considerable share in the land of the village, and were apparently responsible for its administration. If we consider the evidence of the *Bṛhatkathākośa* of Hariṣeṇācārya, composed in about A.D. 920, it would appear that the *mahattara* of a village occupied the pastoral land adjoining the village on condition that he gave 1,000 pitchers of ghee to the ruler.[3] This substantial class, found in village settlements from Gupta times onwards, cut across varṇa and caste boundaries, and while it seems to have held land in each village it did not always enjoy the same ritual status. Such modern survivals of the title as *mahto*, *mehtā*, *mahathā*, *malhotrā*, *mehrotrā*, *mehtar*, etc., are found among both the higher and lower castes in modern times, and even making allowance for vicissitudes in the fortunes of these families it would appear that at least in some cases their medieval ancestors enjoyed the headship of the village and were substantial people. The same thing can be said of the *paṭṭakilas*, village headmen, in western India. Mentioned in inscriptions of the 11th and 12th centuries they did not always belong to the same caste, and their modern descendants *pāṭils* or *paṭels* do not constitute one single caste. Similarly *gāvuṃḍas*, village elders and headmen who were assigned lands and given fiscal and administrative rights in the medieval Deccan,

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1. I. 322.
2. IV. 620 ff; VIII. 560 ff.
3. Quoted in B. N. Sharma, op. cit., p. 311.

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did not belong to one single caste, and their modern repre-entatives called *gauḍas* in Mysore are regarded as śūdras.

DECLINE OF VAIŚYAS AND ADVANCE OF ŚŪDRAS

The varṇa system was modified not only by the rise of the various strata of landed gentry connected with administration but also by the change in the relative position of the vaiśyas and śūdras. In post-Gupta times the śūdras no longer appear mainly as slaves, artisans and agricultural labourers; they take the place of vaiśyas as cultivators. Hsüan Tsang clearly states that the śūdras were agriculturists.[1] Albiruni notes the absence of any significant difference between the vaiśyas and the śūdras, who lived together in the same town and village and mixed together in the same house.[2] This change is reflected in some medieval texts, which represent the śūdras as farmers and agriculturists. The *Skanda Purāṇa* describes the śūdra as giver of grain (*annada*) and householder (*gṛhastha*).[3] The *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi* of Hemacandra defines farmers and cultivators as *kuṭumbins*.[4] In our times śūdra castes called kurmis in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and kunbis in Maharashtra are apparently the descendants of the medi-eval *kuṭumbins*.

From the beginning of the Christian era the Smṛtis approximate the vaiśyas to the position of the śūdras. By the 6th century A.D. the vaiśyas practically loose their identity as a peasant caste. The *Skanda Purāṇa* predicts that the traders would decline in the Kali age, that some would become oilmen and winnowers of grain (*taṇḍulakāriṇaḥ*), and that some would seek refuge with the *rājaputras*, and others with all kinds of varṇas.[5] By the 11th century they came to be treated as śūdras ritually and legally, for Albiruni notes that both vaiśyas and śūdras are punished with the amputation of the tongue for reciting Vedic texts.[6] As traders the vaiśyas seem to have been well off till the 5th century A.D. when Fa-hsien speaks of their charities in glowing terms. But in post-Gupta times

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1. T. Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, ed. T. Rhys Davids and S. W. Bushell, 2 volumes (London, 1904-5), i, 168.
2. Sachau, i, 101.
3. Nagara Khanda, VI. 242. 31.
4. III. 554.
5. Brahma Khanda, II. 39. 291-2.
6. Sachau, ii, 136.

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they suffered in position on account of decline in trade. There is good evidence to show that from the 8th century A.D. trade and commerce declined in Bengal and that traders lost in importance. Professor Niharanjan Ray draws attention to a significant passage in this connection. In the reign of Lakṣmaṇasena, in connection with the unfurling ceremony of the trader's banner called *śakradhvaja*, a writer says : "O where are the traders who once held you aloft. You are now being used as plough or animal-post".[1] Commercial decline naturally undermined the position of those who practised commerce.

Although Hinduism spread over the distant parts of the country in medieval times, it did not mean diffusion of the fourfold varṇa system which had originated and developed in the central part of the Gangetic plains. In northern India many castes are grouped under kṣatriyas and vaiśyas from early times, but in South India and Bengal we find mainly brāhmaṇas and śūdras to the exclusion of intermediary castes. This peculiar phenomenon can be traced to the early medieval period.

Brahmanism advanced in Bengal and South India in Gupta and post-Gupta times when the distinctions between the vaiśyas and śūdras had got blurred and the advent of the Rajputs had thrown the original kṣatriya varṇa into the background. The progress of brahmanism was not in the nature of the mass migration of Vedic Aryans, whose bulk was formed by the *viś* or vaiśyas. Hence the tribal and non-Hindu people in the peripheral regions were admitted to the brahmanical system mainly as śūdras. The autochthonous inhabitants of these areas may have been conquered by the kṣatriya or Rajput princes, but their acculturation was really carried out by the brāhmaṇas who functioned as literate and enlightened landowners in these areas. Anthropometric studies suggest that in Bengal the śūdras are indigenous inhabitants, but the brāhmaṇas are not. According to Mahalanobis various śūdra castes in Bengal belong to the same stock and resemble their neighbours in Bihar. But the brāhmaṇas of Bengal resemble their counterparts from northern India.[2]

It is true that in this period the incorporation of foreign invaders and immigrant tribes added new castes to the kṣatriya fold. But Bengal and South India were never seriously affected by foreign invasions. In these areas only

1. *Bangalir Itihasa* (Adi Parva) (Calcutta, 1948), p. 343.
2. R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, i (Dacca, 1943), 558-9.

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the ruling chiefs of local tribes were admitted as kṣatriyas, and the vast majority of their tribal kinsmen were condemned to the position of śūdras. In the absence of intermediary castes there was more of social polarisation in Bengal and South India than in any other part of the country. It is perhaps this which accounts for extremist movements in these regions in subsequent times.

PROLIFERATION OF CASTES

The early medieval peroid was a period of proliferation and fragmentation. The existing varṇas were split up into many castes, and numerous new tribes and castes were annexed to and incorporated within them. A village named Bṛhat-Chattivannā,[1] inhabited by 36 varṇas, is mentioned in an 10th century Bengal copper-plate, and several villages bearing similar names in present-day Bihar may have originated in medieval times.

The process of proliferation appears to be most striking among the brāhmaṇas. Many brāhmaṇa castes were named after the type of ritual they practised or the branch of Vedic learning they cultivated, but the most important factor in the multiplication of their castes was the growth of strong localism. In land charters the brāhmaṇas are identified by their *gotra*, by the male ancestor's names sometimes extending up to four generations, by the branch of Vedic learning, and finally by the original home—the villlage—from where they come. In course of time they came to be recognised only by their *gotra* and *mūla*, family and territorial affiliations. At present it is difficult to be certain about the purity and continuity of their *gotras*, for members of non-Aryan tribes, especially in the Deccan and South India, seem to have been given Aryan *gotras* and thus made brāhmaṇas, but on the basis of field work one can find out their territorial antecedents. In most land charters the original homes of the brāhmaṇas are proudly mentioned, and from the Gupta period a brāhmaṇa is recognised by the village or the villages to which he belongs. In post-Gupta inscriptions praises are showered on several villages because of their being the native lands of the brāhmaṇas. A typical example of attachment to the village is provided by the description of the village Siddhala, which in an 11th century inscription is called the best of villages, the ornament of Āryāvarta, the goddess of fortune presiding over Rāḍha.[2]

1. Puspa Niyogi, *Brahmanic Settlements in Different Subdivisions of Benga* (Calcutta, 1967), p. 55.
2. *Inscriptions of Bengal*, iii, no. 4, verse 3.

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By late medieval times the brāhmaṇas of Rāḍha, West Bengal, had come to be divided into 56 subcastes based on their original villages (*gāmīs*),[1] several of which are mentioned in inscriptions of the 11th-13th centuries. In the 14th century Harisiṃhadeva determined the relative status of the Maithil brāhmaṇas, who came to be divided into about 180 original homes (*mūlas*), and eventually their total original homes or subcastes shot up to about 1,000. If the total Maithil population is taken as 1500,000 (unfortunately the caste census has been now given up), it will roughly mean one subcaste for every 1500 Maithils. An 11th century Pāla grant shows that sometimes a brāhmaṇa was identified by his connection with as many as three villages, and the practice became more widespreasd later. Every Maithil subcaste based on one, two or three villages as its original home feels proud of itself and refuses to have social intercourse with subcastes considered to be inferior in the Maithil caste hierarchy. Similarly the kāyasthas came to be divided into territorial subcastes. At present the karaṇa kāyasthas of Bihar maintain lists of their numerous *mūlas* like the Maithils, and the ambaṣṭha kāyasthas are divided into more than 100 subcastes, based on their homes in different villages, and all this is taken into account in settling marriages. It is obvious that the concept of *grāmadharma* was more popular with the brāhmaṇas, kāyasthas and other literate Hindus who could maintain their genealogies. Lower castes such as goalas and kurmis, who are far more numerous, are also divided into territorial groups forming subcastes, but because of lack of written records feelings of family and village have not been accentuated among them. The *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* dictum that difference in the country (*deśabheda*) leads to difference in the caste worked strongly in the case of medieval brāhmaṇas,[2] but it also explains the multiplication of castes among the other varṇas.

In the kṣatriya community proliferation was caused mainly by the emergance of a new people called the Rajputs. No other community developed so much of racial and family pride as the Rajputs did. Some of them may have descended from the original kṣatriya stock. The practice of ascribing solar and lunar origins to ruling dynasties in inscriptions started from about the 7th century. Probably the Cāḷukyas, Candellas, Pālas, etc., were local tribes who were given respectable kṣatriya lineage by the brāhmaṇa genealogists. The rule *kaṣtriyo rājā ucyate* operated throughout the length and breadth of the country

1. Niyogi, op. cit., p. 33.
2. Brahma Khanda, X. 14; cf. 168.

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in early medieval times. The term *saṃskāravarjitaḥ*, deprived of rituals, applied to the neo-kṣatriya called *vrātya* was a euphemism for his admission to the brahmanical social order through inferior rites. The Bactrian Greeks, Śakas, Parthians, etc., because of the absence of any strong religion or culture of their own, were absorbed into the Hindu social system as second class kṣatriyas. Really the kṣatriya castes multiplied from the 5th and 6th centuries when the Central Asian peoples such as the Hūṇas and Gurjars joined their ranks as Rajputs. Probably the Solaṃkīs (Caulukyas), Paramāras, Cāhamānas, Tomaras, Gāhaḍvālas, etc., also had Central Asian origins. Although the Jats are not regarded as Rajputs, they had racial affiliations with Central Asian peoples. The composition of their present caste unions called *khaps* suggest that theirs was a composite caste of peasants and soldiers who were recruited from the Gurjara, Tomara and other Rajput clans.[1] We hear of Tomar Jats and Gujar Jats, and a document of the 13th century shows that Tomar and Gujar representatives sat on the Jat assembly.[2] We also find that the Jats, the Ahirs, and the Gujars smoke and drink together. It would be wrong to think that all foreigners were accepted as kṣatriyas and Rajputs, for in course of time the Gujar people broke up into brāhmaṇas, banias, potters, goldsmiths, not to speak of herdsmen and cultivators (kunbis) who were looked upon as śūdras.[3]

The śūdras came to have the largest number of castes in early medieval times. The earliest law-books mention 10 to 15 mixed castes, but the law-book of Manu, a work of the first century A D., enumerates 61 mixed castes.[4] This number exceeds 100 if we add to it the list of additional castes given in the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*[5] A huge increase in the number of śūdra castes can be inferred from the *Vaijayanti* of Yādavaprakāśa and also from the *Abhidhānacintāmaṇi* of Hemacandra. The *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, a work of about the 8th century A.D., states that thousands of mixed castes are produced as a result of the connection of vaiśya women with men of lower castes,[6] although these are not specified.

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1. M. C. Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India* (Oxford, 1966), Appendix, I, p. 249.
2. Ibid., pp. 254-5.
3. D. R. Bhandarkar, "Foreign Elements in the Hindu Population", *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, i, 301-3.
4. X. 1-51.
5. Brahma Khanda, X. 14-136.
6. II. 81-2.

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The conquest of the backward peoples living in the jungles, forests, etc., by brahmanised princes from agriculturally advanced areas enormously added to the number and variety of śūdra castes. The suppression of Śabaras, Bhillas, Pulindas, etc., is referred to in a medieval inscription from central India.[1] For five hundred years from the 9th century almost all the Deccan powers fought against the Ābhīras,[2] who could not be easily assimilated into the brahmaṇical order. An inscription of A.D. 861 shows that the Pratīhāra prince Kakkuka destroyed and conquered a village of Ābhīras near Jodhpur and settled it with brāhmaṇas and vaiśyas, who were promised safety and livelihood.[3] A Kalacuri inscription of the 12th century speaks of the deliverance of the Ratanpur prince Jājjalladeva II from the clutches of a tribal people called Thirus or Tharus, which was celebrated by his donation of a village to two brāhmaṇas.[4] It is not clear whether this village lay in the Thiru area, but priests were granted land in many subjugated territories, where they inducted the indigenous aboriginal tribal peoples into their cultural fold. This process may have been also peaceful, but peaceful or otherwise it succeeded because of the superior material culture of the brāhmaṇas who not only taught new scripts, language and rituals to the preliterate people but also acquainted them with plough cultivation, new crops, seasons, calendar, preservation of cattle-wealth, etc. The tribal peoples were not always given the same place in the brahmanical order, and even the same tribe broke up into several varṇas and castes. We hear of Ābhīra brāhmaṇas, Ābhīra kṣatriyas, Ābhīra vaiśyas, Ābhīra mahaśūdras, and of Ābhīra carpenters and goldsmiths[5] although most Ābhīras seem to have been admitted into Hindu society as śūdras. However, in all such cases *jātidharma* was strictly respected, and each constituent caste was allowed to retain its customs and manners. The Ābhīras, Āgarīs, Ambaṣṭhas, Bhillas, Caṇḍālas, Kauñcas, etc., mentioned as mixed castes in the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*[6] and other texts, were originally tribal people who were accommodated in the brahmanical social framework either as pure or impure śūdras.

The middle ages saw a phenomenal growth in the number of impure śūdras or untouchables, who are first

1. *EI*, i, no. 38, II, verse 22.
2. Bhagwansingh Suryavamsi, *The Abhiras : Their History and Culture* (Baroda, 1962), pp. 39-40.
3. Ibid., p. 40.
4. *CII*, iv. no. 99, l. 28.
5. D. R. Bhandarkar, op. cit., 286-8.
6. Brahma Khanda, X. 17-136.

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noted in the 4th century B.C. by Pāṇini. Medieval legal texts describe the untouchables as eaters of cow, and list them as antyajas, barāṭa, barūḍa, bheda, bhilla, caṇḍāla, carmakāra, dāśa, naṭa, rajaka,[1] etc. Some of these appear in about the beginning of the Christian era. Bhedas and tantuvāyas are mentioned by Albiruni, who also refers to bhadhatu, caṇḍāla, ḍoma, hāḍi,[2] etc. Twelve categories of untouchables are mentioned in early medieval law-books, but the actual number might be much more. Detailed rules in the law-book of Parāśara suggest an increase in the number of caṇḍālas and śvapakas.

It is difficult to explain this large increase in the number of untouchables. Most untouchable castes were backward tribes whose induction into the Hindu system was accomplished through brahmanisation and through the spread of Hinduised Buddhism. This can be inferred from brahmanical texts as well as from Buddhist Caryāpadas. The latter refer to the ḍomas, niṣādas and their women-folk and to the kāpālikas, all of whom generally lived on mounds outside the villages and were untouchables for the brāhmaṇas.[3] Apparently certain tribal people could not be fully absorbed in Hindu society because of their being very backward and hence had to be pushed to the position of untouchables; or possibly those who offered stiff resistance to the process of conquest and Hinduisation were dispossessed of their lands in the villages and forced to settle outside. Perhaps this happened to the Kaivartas who were finally overpowered by the Pālas in the 11th century. This may also be true of the Ḍomba tribe, who appear to be an important people in the Dombīpādacaryā.[4] Since brahmanisation took place on a very large scale in early medieval times, the number of untouchable castes increased substantially. In earlier times certain varieties of hunters and artisans were rendered untouchables, but now even some agriculturist castes were condemned to this position. This may have happened not so much on account of the hatred of princes and priests for agriculture as on account of their contempt for the backward agriculturists who opposed the new order. On the other hand the fact that a good number of śūdras were reduced to the position of untouchables must have given satisfaction to the remainder who now practically took the place of the vaiśyas in social hierarchy.

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1. Quoted in Vasudeva Upadhyay, *Socio-Religious Condition of North India* (700-1200 A. D.) (Varanasi, 1964), p. 92, footnote nos. 3 & 4.
2. Sachau, i, 101-2.
3. Atindra Mojumder, *The Caryapadas* (Calcutta, 1967), p. 10.
4. Ibid., pp. 48-9.

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Another significant process which led to the multiplication of śūdra castes was the transformation of crafts into castes. As trade and commerce languished in post-Gupta times craft guilds tended to become stagnant, immobile, more and more hereditary, and more and more localised. Trades and guilds gradually constituted themselves into closed, exclusive groups resembling castes for all practical purposes. Aparārka quotes Bṛhaspati to show that heads of guilds may reprimand and condemn wrong-doers and may also excommunicate them.[1] It seems that *nāpita*, *modaka*, *tāmbulika*, *svarṇakāra*, *mālākāra*, *śaṅkhakāra*, *sūtrakāra*, *citrakāra*, etc., who, like aborigines, are all called mixed castes in medieval texts,[2] obviously emerged as castes out of various crafts. Craft villages are mentioned in ancient texts, but now they find place in medieval inscriptions. Thus we hear of two villages called Kumbhārapadraka,[3] which evidently belonged to the potter caste. Modern specialisation means skill and proficiency in the craft wherever and whenever it can be acquired but medieval specialisation meant attachment to the master, to his place, and to the family which practised the craft.

A factor which multiplied the number of castes among both the higher and lower orders of Hindu society, especially in the Deccan and South India, in medieval times was their religious affiliation. The parallel between the multiplication of sects and that of castes in medieval times is very close, and the former helped the latter. Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism and Jainism—each one of these religions—proliferated into numerous sects not so much due to basic differences in doctrines as due to minor differences in rituals and even in food and dress, which all were sustained by regional practices. Some religious teachers kept moving from place to place, but many others were tied down to maṭhas, monasteries and temples by means of land grants.

Buddhism came to be divided into 18 sects, and Jainism came to be divided into seven sects in Karṇātaka. Each one of these sects came to be led by its teacher or guru who demanded unquestioned allegiance from his followers. Between the followers and the Supreme God the teacher acted

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1. Quoted in B. P. Mazumdar, *Socio-Economic History of Northern India* (1030-1194 A. D.) (Calcutta, 1960), p. 211.
2. *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Brahma Khanda, X. 17-136.
3. Puspa Niyogi, op. cit., p. 53.

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as an intermediary just as a vassal acted as an intermediary between the actual tiller of the soil and the king. In course of time members of the sect began to behave as members of a caste. They remained confined to their sects and refused to interdine and sit together with members of another sect. By late medieval times these sects had become full-fledged castes. The Liṅgāyats and Vīraśaivas in Karnāṭaka and Rādhāsvāmīs in northern India formed separate castes. In Rajasthan and Western India the Jains came to constitute a large caste divided into so many subcastes. In the Gangetic valley the goalas, who worshipped Kṛṣṇa and thought themselves to be racially connected with the divine hero, called themselves Kisnots.

It is an irony of history that the religious sects which sprang up to remove caste disparities and privileges based on birth were themselves swallowed by the caste system. But without any fundamental change in social and economic structure, this was inevitable, for the reforming zeal and idealism of the initial reformers had no solid foundations to sustain themselves.

The present survey shows that the pre-Muslim society in northern India underwent some important changes. Unequal distribution of land and military power created feudal ranks which cut across varṇa considerations, especially at the higher and literate level. Frequent land grants and partitions led to the rise and growth of a new literate class, called the kāyasthas, whose place in the varṇa system could not be clearly defined. The varṇa system was also modified by the transformation of the śūdras into cultivators and the relegation of the vaiśyas to the position of the śūdras, with the result that the newly founded brahmanical order in Bengal and South India provided mainly for brāhmaṇas and śūdras. The most spectacular development was the proliferation of castes, which affected the brāhmaṇas, the kāyasthas, the kaṣtriyas or the Rajputs and above all the śūdras. The number of the mixed castes rose by leaps and bounds, and the untouchable castes increased enormously. These social changes can be understood in terms of a strong sense of feudal localism fostered by closed economic units based on intense preoccupation with land and in the context of the absorption of the tribal peoples into the brahmanical fold through conquests and land grants to brāhmaṇas.

Abbreviations

CII *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, i-iii, London, 1888-1929; iv, Ootacamund, 1955
EI *Epigraphia Indica*, Calcutta and Delhi

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